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ABSTRACT

The impact of Mardel Ogilvie's teaching of speech at Queens College (New York) during the 1950s and 1960s can be distilled into three areas: her personality, her impact on the lives of her students, and her contributions to the speech profession. Mardel's warmth was punctuated by her sense of humor, which always de-escalated crises. Her attitude of respect was communicated to the honor students as well as to the "strugglers"; no question was too stupid, no act too dumb. Her impact on her students has either obviously changed the course of their lives or subtly insinuated itself into their professional behavior. She often "went to bat" with the education faculty for students whom she knew, intuitively, would be excellent in the classroom, but who did not quite fit some of the rigid requirements. Ogilvie's influence was also based upon a consistent thread of concepts that pervaded her teaching: "Teaching is not covering. We cover with blankets; we teach by communicating so that students can change their behaviors." She made major contributions to the field of speech and language education, and to national, regional, and state publications and meetings in a variety of content areas. Her greatest contribution, however, has been her conception and implementation of the speech education program at Queens College from 1949 to 1968, a unique and exciting program that combines training in theatre, oral interpretation, debate, speech improvement, rhetoric, phonetics, pedagogy, and puppetry and explores the linkages between these disciplines. (HTH)

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A GREAT TEACHER OF THE EAST: MARDEL OGILVIE

by Barbara Lieb-Brilhart

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A GREAT TEACHER OF THE EAST: MARDEL OGILVIE

by Barbara Lieb-Brilhart*

Unlike the other great teachers being honored on this program today, the individual whom I am about to describe, happily for us, is present in this room to bear witness to my remarks. While that is indeed an honor for me, the situation is not without its' disadvantages. For it is likely that Mardel Ogilvie's memories of our days at Queens College are sharper than my own, and I will need to be vigilant about sticking to the truth. In addition, while preparing for this occasion has been a most enjoyable experience, it has not been without its' drawbacks.

First of all, in remembering Mardel as my undergraduate teacher and speech advisor at Queens College, I was shocked into the realization that all this had occurred over twenty-six years ago! (That's twenty-six years of exchanging Christmastime letters, Mardel--not to mention our phone calls every time I needed your emotional support to make a major career change--a phenomenon which seems to have occurred about every five or six years in my life!)

Also, because I felt honored in being the spokesperson for so many students whom Mardel has influenced both at Queens College, and later as Director of Individualized Studies at Lehman College, I decided to poll a few other aging alumni, along with Mardel's constant collaborater, Dr. Jon Eisenson, so that they could add their anecdotes to mine. The result of several hours of telephone reminiscing with Norma Stegmeier and Matt Guise in New York, Paul Friedman in Kansas, and Jon Eisenson in California, produced ten pages of wonderful "Mardelia" and one whopping telephone bill!

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Fortunately, my Queens College training helped me to distill our ideas into three topically organized areas reflective of Mardel's greatness: her personality, her impact on our lives, and her contributions to our profession.

To describe Mardel's personality, let me begin with one of Haim Ginott's discoveries as a young teacher:

> I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized (1972, pp. 15-16).

Ginott's realization was one that Mardel seemed to carry with her at all times in her interactions with youngsters as well as with college students. Her warmth was punctuated by her sense of humor which always de-escalated crises, and of course, by the distinctly Scottish giggles, which are as spontaneous now as they were thirty years ago.

My interviewees and I were unsuccessful in recalling one cranky Mardel moment. No question was too stupid, no act too dumb, and no student too cantankerous to crack Mardel's lady-like respect for us, nor her "healing" demeanor. This attitude of respect was communicated to the honor students as well as to the "strugglers." And for those of us who continued in the profession to which she dedicated her life, we never retained the feelings of awe described by students in regard to other great teachers. For upon graduation, we were drawn into her professional "causes," and quickly became her colleagues.

In addition, Mardel was always radiant, fashionably dressed, and beautifully coiffed, factors which enhanced her dynamic classroom presence. We found (and still find) in Mardel a joie de vivre and a child-like curiosity

in everything around her. Indeed, in our phone conversation two weeks ago, Mardel warned me--"Now, Barbara, keep this light!" When I asked her what she felt was most significant about her career, Mardel said: "Tell them no one could keep me confined in the play pen--I nosed into too many aspects of our discipline. Perhaps, I'm still just an adolescent searching for the essence!" (There--Mardel, I told them!)

Part of the Mardel personality was to open her home to her students, an unusual behavior for professors in a New York "non-sleep away" (commuter) college like Queens in the days of the fifties. Over the years, we even came to know her cat, Sonny, and in our distant places, mourned his passing with her.

Jon Eisenson remembers that when Mardel came to Queens College from Fredonia College in 1949 to build the speech-education program, students "fell in love with her," and that her diplomacy enabled the speech faculty to bridge many difficulties with colleagues in other departments.

But Mardel's personality as a teacher left its deepest mark on me in a single incident. During my senior year at Queens College, I was developing a trait which was to plague me for the rest of my life--my tendency to become over-committed and to have to juggle priorities. (You see, I was inculcating Mardel's problem with the playpen, as I became involved in theatre, debate, student teaching, oral interpretation festivals and student council).

Well, in 1957, the speech methods course taught by Mardel required submission of a certain number of case studies in order for me to earn the grade of "A." Dr. Ogilvie was understanding about my overload and granted me an extension of time. However, the extension period came and went without my completing the needed papers, and to my great horror, my

transcript arrived one day showing a grade of "A" for the course. I was in great turmoil, unable to sleep for three nights. Not only did I not deserve this grade, which she had obviously given me by mistake, but I had reniged on a commitment to a teacher whom I respected. "Furthermore," I lamented, "how could I ever become a brilliant, self-disciplined human being like Dr. Ogilvie?" Finally, I set up a conference. Trembling, I began: "Dr. Ogilvie, about that A in your course." But she interrupted, swiftly, "Don't worry, dear, I've already changed your grade to a C. I'm so sorry you missed the deadline on those case studies."

There was not a trace of disgust or disappointment, nor did she deliver a lecture on the sins of slothfulness. It was simple Scottish discipline. It was James Popham, Benjamin Bloom, and of course, Haim Ginott--everything that my subsequent years in educational research were to reveal to me about effective teaching: Balance warmth with rigor. I the student, had missed the target, but my teacher still loved and accepted me!

My interviewees and I agreed that Mardel's impact on us had either obviously changed the course of our lives or had subtly insinuated itself into our future professional behaviors.

Mardel often "went to bat" with the education faculty for students whom she knew, intuitively, would be excellent in the classroom, but who did not quite fit some of the rigid requirements. For one of my interviewees, who was perceived as being "too nice to the children," Mardel convinced the faculty that he would perform excellently in a group setting. For many years this individual has been happily employed as a successful therapist for the multiply handicapped.

Mardel also used the "velvet glove" on me to change the course of my life. Like most other speech majors at Queens College in those days, I

was placed into a remedial speech course to learn to speak like "General American." Having just switched from a pre-medical to a speech education program, as a result of Paul Holtman's seductive basic speech course, I viewed the lack of the /r/ sound in my speech (except for the intrusive "idear of"), as a portent of failure as a speech major. My first encounter with Mardel was when, as a hopeless case, I was assigned to work with her to overcome the /r/ problem. Mardel engaged me in "chit-chat," which I later learned was her major diagnostic instrument. Then she said, "Now you and I will pretend we are in a jungle. We are both ferocious lions fighting for our turfs. As I step on your turf, what do you say?"

With my best Barbara Walters lall, I replied" "ger". "And I say back grrr," said Mardel. "What do you say?" We sat there roaring at each other for quite some time until Mardel finally said, "Now how do you feel about being in a remedial speech class?" And I roared: "GRRR!" And I am here to tell you that after just one session with Mardel, I could say Hunter College or Princeton, or even Harvard--but more importantly, from Mardel's point of view, I learned how to roar, and I've been roaring ever since! I was reminded the other day, when working, with medical technologists on their non-assertive relationships with physicians, of my walk through the jungle with Mardel, and the persuasiveness of the roar over the lall became ever more apparent!

Mardel's influence was also based upon a consistent thread of concepts which pervaded her teaching. Years later, as I tackled the tasks of educating prospective teachers, I heard myself saying Mardel's words: "Teaching is not covering. We cover with blankets; we teach by communicating so that students can change their behaviors."

The parallel between teaching and communicating internalized from Mardel, was to permeate my professional goals and activities for the rest of

my life. In the third edition of Speech Correction in the Schools published in 1971, Eisenson and Ogilvie wrote:

> In this chapter we will talk about the teacher's and clinician's roles as communicators of their ideas and feelings to their students, as recipients of their students' ideas and feelings, and of the resulting interaction. Teaching is communication. Children regard the communicator who imparts meanings and feelings with sensitivity, clarity, and fairness, who in turn receives the children's messages with understanding, thoughtfulness, and appreciation, and who as a result, interacts positively, as a capable teacher or clinician (p. 67).

Although this communicative approach to education is a most difficult concept to teach others, it is the basis for the most of the research findings supported by millions of dollars of government sponsored research that I discovered during my work with the National Institute of Education.

Mardel, of course, made major contributions to the field of speech and language education. But she was always so modest, so low in ego needs, that some of us never realized until years later, just how influential she had been. It was only recently that I learned that she, Evelyn Konigsberg, Madge Kramer, and Bower Aly, had conceived the Speech Teacher journal, now Communication Education. Her 1954 book Speech in the Elementary School was a landmark publication. And in 1984, she and Jon Eisenson published their fifth edition of Speech Correction in the Schools, now entitled Communication Disorders in Children, with Mardel's contributions on speech and language research very up-to-date, according to Jon. Mardel has also contributed prolifically in a variety of content areas to national, regional and state publications and meetings. Paul Friedman's discovery in doing library research was that her productivity and influence on speech and language education was far more extensive than he had ever realized when he was her student in the late 1950's.

But Mardel's greatest contribution, in my opinion, was her conception and implementation of the speech education program at Queens College from

1949-1968. It was a unique and exciting program where we obtained training in theatre, oral interpretation, debate, speech improvement clinics, rhetoric, phonetics, pedagogy, puppetry, etc. Our broad education required that instructors and students alike, explore the linkages among the fields. The understandings gained from these experiences were vital in my later university roles where I taught across departments, and in my staff position with the Speech Communication Association, where I often needed to explain various facets of our discipline.

Today, I roar like Mardel's lion when I meet a speech pathologist who never had a course in interpersonal communication or public speaking, or graduate students, rich in statistical methods, who never learned through performance, the essence of the phenomena they seek to research.

One last point about Mardel's influence is that it was she who made one feel pride in the role of "teacher." Queens College, in the 50's, like other campuses before Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique, saw females enrolled primarily in education and nursing courses and males in pre-med and pre-law. After becoming a speech major, because I honestly came to believe that the communication mission was more powerful than my previously selected "medicine mission," I sought to avoid teaching because of the associated sex stereotype. It was through Mardel that I came to feel that teaching was really applied communication, and that I could call myself "teacher" with pride instead of deprecation.

Most importantly, Mardel saw instinctively what others discovered through research or "trial and error." As I struggled recently to write textbook chapters on "classroom climate" and "coping with diversity in the classroom," I summarized research from a variety of sources. But, of course,

after formulating what I felt were profound conclusions, I later discovered that Mardel had already said it in her 1961 text, Teaching Speech in the High School:

> Although the conditions in your community and in the world do affect the social climate of your classroom, you can control this climate to some extent. One important principle in this control is that you accept your boys and girls as they are. The boys and girls in your classroom are of different races, nationalities, religions, socio-economic statuses, and intellectual abilities. They have varying beliefs and attitudes. They speak differently. The example you set of accepting people as they are is significant in developing a desirable social climate in your classroom (p. 12).

And so, Mardel, at the conclusion of this program, I am going to present you with a copy of Communication for the Contemporary Classroom, because the best ideas are really yours just bolstered with a little late-breaking research. And because you are still one of the best editors I know, I am also presenting you with a "red pencil," your favorite instrument of rigor--so that our second edition will be even more contemporary than the first.

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